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High school grad rate improves

By Berny Morson, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

Thursday, April 3, 2008

Colorado's high school graduation rate edged up slightly last year, to 75 percent, the state education department announced Wednesday.

That's 0.9 percent higher than the rate for the class of 2006, or about 550 more graduates statewide.

Blacks and Hispanics boosted their graduation rates in 2007, but continued to lag the rates for white and Asian students.

Among black students, 65.4 percent graduated while 57.1 percent of Hispanic students got diplomas.

Education commissioner Dwight Jones said the improvement is encouraging, but not good enough.

"Teachers, principals and parents should feel good about the upward trend, but at the same time we need to redouble our efforts," Jones said in a prepared statement.

Exactly why the graduation rate improved is not clear, education department spokesman Mark Stevens said.

"It's just such a small number in terms of percentage increase across 178 school districts that it would be hard to assign a reason," Stevens said.

Comparisons before 2006 are not possible because the system for calculating the graduation rate was changed under a law passed in 2005.

8th-grade writing needs work

By Berny Morson, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

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Colorado eighth graders exceeded the national average on a writing test administered last year, the U.S. Education Department reported this morning.

But the national average was hardly good news — only 31 percent of the national sample scored at the proficient or advanced level on the test.

In Colorado, 38 percent of the eighth graders scored at the proficient or advanced level.

The tests were administered as part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The program tests students every several years, rather than annually as under Colorado's statewide achievement tests.

The NAEP tested a national sample of 139,900 students at 6,810 schools. The Colorado program tests all children.

The latest figures show progress since 1998, the last time Colorado eighth graders were tested in writing under NAEP. The Colorado students improved by an average of 10 points on a scale that runs from 0 to 300.

The Colorado average for 2007 was 161 on the 300-point scale. The national average was 154.

Materials distributed by the education department do not make clear how the scores translate into categories such as advanced, proficient, basic and below basic.

Colorado students may have outperformed other states because writing is tested annually under CSAP, said Pam A. Sandoval, the Colorado Education Department official who coordinates NAEP testing.

Sandoval said the results, while above the national average, could use improvement.

"We always want to see more improvement," Sandoval said.

Wednesday, April 2, 2008

HS grad rate edges up

By Bill Scanlon, Rocky Mountain News (Contact)

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An extra 550 young people wore caps and gowns last year as Colorado's high school graduation percentage inched up from 74 percent to 75 percent.

Paradoxically, the completion rate — counting graduates and those who got a GED or some kind of certificate — fell slightly from 81 percent to 80 percent, according to new Colorado Department of Education numbers.

The report also showed that more than one quarter of Colorado's students changed schools or districts last school year — because their families moved or for another reason.

Education Commissioner Dwight Jones hailed the higher graduation numbers as "an encouraging increase."

But Jones cautioned: "We have major work ahead, particularly in closing the large gaps that exist based on race and income."

The percentage of blacks who graduated rose last year, but blacks and Hispanics still trail Asians and whites by double digits.

Asians had an 84 percent graduate rate; the rate for whites was 82 percent; 65 percent for black students; 59 percent for Native Americans and 57 percent for Hispanics.

The graduation rate for black students statewide climbed almost three percentage points to 65 percent.

The gap between whites and blacks shrunk slightly last year, while the gap between whites and Hispanics grew by almost a percentage point.

Colorado calculates its graduation rate by starting with ninth-graders in a particular school or district. That number is tracked and adjusted for verified transfers in and out of the district. The rate is calculated by

comparing the number of graduates to the number in line to graduate four years previous.

For the 2006-07 school year, 60,487 students were in the membership base. Of those, 45,268 graduated.

The nearly 1 percent rise in graduates means an extra 550 students graduated who wouldn't have if the rate had been the same as it was in 2005-2006.

Among the districts Jones cited for recognition were;

— Cherry Creek Schools, where the graduation rate for blacks improved three years in a row, and last year stood at 86 percent — higher than the white rate statewide.

— Fountain-Fort Carson School District 8, where for the past three years black students graduate at a higher rate than their white counterparts.

— Durango School District 9-R, where the graduation rate for Hispanic students skyrocketed from 40 percent in 2004 to 66 percent last year.

— Monte Vista School District C-8, where graduation rates for both whites and Hispanics grew steadily over the past two years.